

Hiring heralds new ice age in Hills

BY LARRY O'CONNOR
STAFF WRITER

Al Strasser is the new Farmington Hills ice boss, but he's talking about thawing things.

At least in terms of making both hockey and figure skating camps — which have had a frosty relationship in the past — happy when it comes to prime time use at the Farmington Hills Ice Arena. That plus juggling time for open skating are only a few of Strasser's major tasks as new ice arena manager.

"They're always clamoring for time. There would (only) be less friction between them if there was unlimited ice available," Strasser said. "... I think that is somewhat universal."

Strasser, 49, replaces Jerry Nelson, who resigned eight months ago to take a similar job in Florida. Special Service Department's Eric Wurmlinger ran the arena on an interim basis, working closely with Strasser.

The St. Joseph, Mich., native has been assistant ice arena manager for nearly two years.

Strasser previously served as assistant ice arena manager at the Marquette Lakewind Arena in the Upper Peninsula. He was picked out of 40-50 applicants, said Dan Potter, Hills Parks and Recreation director.

■ 'We're finishing the honeymoon phase and going onto the continuation phase.'

Al Strasser
—new manager
Farmington Hills Ice Arena

"We said, 'Hey, we've got the best guy for the position in house,'" Potter said.

Strasser will oversee five-six full-time employees and anywhere from 40-50 part-time staff. The facility has a \$2 million operating budget.

"The challenge is to keep the arena from going into the red," Potter said. "So far, we've been successful in that, but the challenge is there every year."

Instead of filling Strasser's former spot as assistant, a business manager will be hired. That person will oversee the arena's pro shop and concession as well as develop a marketing strategy.

Parks and recreation officials see promotion potential for the twin-rink facility on Eight Mile, namely selling banner and scoreboard advertising to businesses.

"We want to establish a local partnership with businesses and put their name in front of those who

visit the arena," Strasser said.

Summertime use is another area that is being developed. Both ice rinks will be open during the off season. In 1999, one rink will be used for dry floor activities for kids and seniors.

Both rinks are booked during the week in the summer. Weekends are another matter, Strasser said.

An effort will be made to bring more special events, especially tournaments. Farmington Hills Ice Arena will host a women's hockey tourney in March, which is likely to be bolstered by the U.S. Women's Hockey Team's performance in the Winter Olympics.

Strasser is used to such big events; Marquette Lakewind Arena also served as home to the Northern Michigan University Wildcats hockey team, which packed the 4,200-seat facility.

Farmington Hills ice arena continues to grow in popularity, too. Last weekend, some people were turned away from open skating because the rinks were at capacity.

"I've come to know the community, the wants and needs they have," Strasser said. "I think I have a little better insight on where the arena needs to go."

"We're finishing the honeymoon phase and going onto the continuation phase."



STAFF PHOTO BY BRADMAN LAMBERT

Freeze frame: Al Strasser, 49, has been named new manager of the Farmington Hills Ice Arena where he's been an assistant manager for nearly two years. His charge will be to make sure the arena runs smoothly.

Board won't sue; satisfied with \$1 million settlement

BY MARIE CHESTNEY
STAFF WRITER

Clarenceville Public Schools won't sue the state to get more money from the so-called Durant settlement.

School officials will take just over \$1 million as a settlement from the state, one-half up front and the rest through a bond issue over a 10-year period.

The Clarenceville Board of Education made both decisions Thursday.

The good news to Clarenceville residents is that the big chunk of unexpected money could buy some of the things the district needs: new school buses, electronic gear and technology training, school security, textbooks and building improvements and repairs.

The bad news is that the check from the state may never come. An Clarenceville trustee said Thursday, business manager David Bergeron won't be waiting by the mailbox Nov. 16 when the check for \$525,000 — the first half of the settlement — is scheduled to arrive.

"The settlement is not without protest," said Superintendent Tom Tattan. "But we have to make a decision and say whether we will waive our rights to sue and accept the settlement, or not. We have to take what is the best option for us. Bonding for 10 years makes sense for us."

The Birmingham-based Michigan Taxpayers United Inc. has threatened to appeal the settlement to the Michigan Court of Appeals.

Concerned with future

Rochester Community Schools, one of the original 84 school districts which joined together 17 years ago to sue the state for underfunding special education, is slated to get \$5.1 million in its settlement.

Rochester Superintendent John Schultz expects his district will get its check from the state, and urges all non-suing districts to accept theirs, too.

But, in a letter to all fellow superintendents in Michigan, Schultz also urges them to immediately file another lawsuit if they see the state once again reneging on its obligation to fund special education programs.

If the state goes down that road once again, Schultz said, budgets for general education students will suffer.

Hills man accused in attack to undergo psychological exam

A Farmington Hills man accused of attacking his nephew with a crowbar at the victim's Livonia house will undergo a court-ordered psychological exam.

John McLean, the attorney for William James Murray, asked for the exam during a 16th District Court hearing Thursday, and Judge Kathleen McCann agreed. In order to schedule the exam, Murray waived his right to have a preliminary hearing within 14 days of his arrest.

Murray was arrested minutes after the Feb. 8 attack on 25-year-old Shawn Card in a bedroom at Card's house on Mallory, police said. There was blood on Murray's clothing, police said,

and a small crowbar was found in his car.

Card had been hit in the head about five times and also suffered hand injuries, police said. Waiting in court Thursday, he said he was doing well and had had surgical pins put into a broken finger.

The exam will help determine Murray's competency and whether he has the capacity for criminal responsibility. The preliminary hearing will be rescheduled. Murray is being held in the Wayne County Jail on a \$500,000 cash or surety bond. He could face up to life in prison if convicted.

— Matt Jachman

CLARENCEVILLE

"We are suggesting that schools in Michigan and their taxpayers not sit on the sideline and accept this injustice," Schultz said in a letter to the district. "Every school district in Michigan is faced with increased, competing financial demands between special education services and general education."

Money for general education students will be "unfairly eroded," Schultz said, when it is spent instead on mandated special education programs.

In time, this will create an "adversarial relationship between parents of special and general education students, as we all are forced to unfairly struggle for limited dollars."

"Local schools should not have to provide quality special education programs at the expense of general education students," he said.

In Livonia
Livonia Public Schools, also one of the 84 school districts which originally filed suit, has decided to take its \$10.3 million settlement from the state. The district is expecting its check April 15.

Bandy Liepa, assistant superintendent for business for Livonia, is optimistic that the check will come.

"I'll be there at the mailbox, with my hand out," Liepa said. All school districts must hold public hearings so residents can say how the money should be spent. Livonia's hearing is in May, Clarenceville's in June.

With Thursday's vote, Clarenceville gave the Michigan Municipal Bond Authority the OK to include its settlement in the state's bond issue.

"We would get 10 years of cash payments through 2007," Tattan said. "The bond is an obligation of the state, not of the district."

Clarenceville's alternative to bonding was to rely on the Michigan Legislature to dole out the second \$525,000 over 15 years. It chose not to go that route.

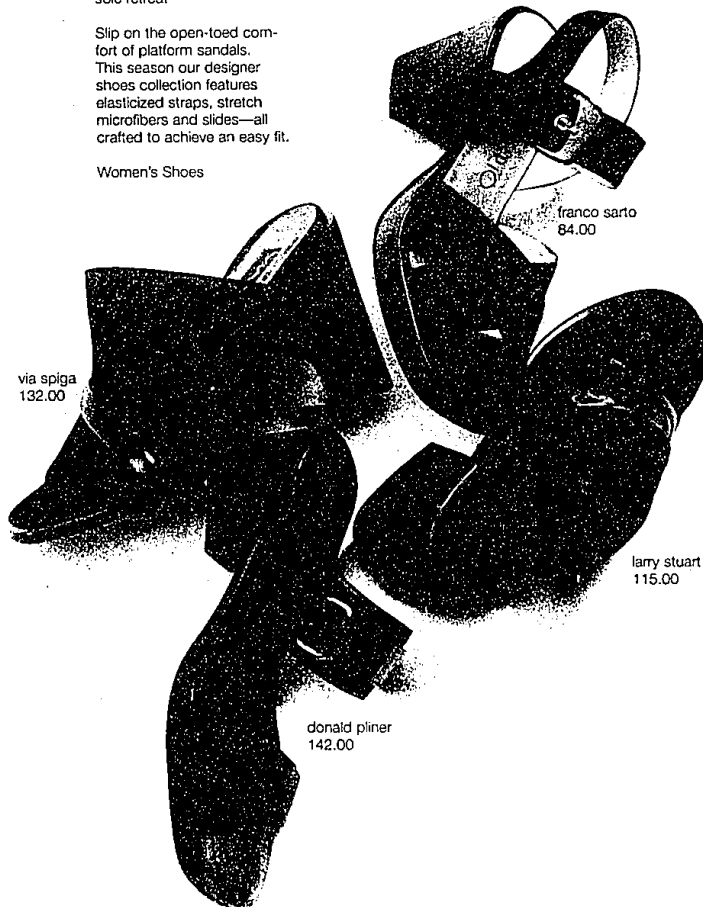
The Durant lawsuit challenged state cuts in mandated special education funding, claiming the underfunding was illegal under the Headlee Amendment.

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